

Mentoring for Change at the City and County of San Francisco Human Services Agency

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

County social service agencies often struggle in the arena of talent recruitment and retention, competing with other jurisdictions as well as the private sector. Employees tend to have higher job satisfaction and seek promotional opportunities within an organization if they feel supported by that organization. Mentoring programs provide professional development opportunities that increase employee job satisfaction and reduce turnover by helping employees excel in their current role or preparing them for career advancements. The City and County of San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) is

developing a mentoring program to address some of these concerns. The Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) and the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) have implemented successful mentoring programs in their jurisdictions. By learning from HSD and SSA's experiences, HSA can tailor its mentoring program to not only meet the business needs of the agency but, more importantly, to provide employees professional development opportunities leading them to stay and grow with the organization.

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Introduction

It is no secret that county social services agencies struggle with talent recruitment and retention, and the City and County of San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) is no exception. When seasoned and experienced employees leave an organization, the precipitous loss of knowledge and experience not only has immediate impacts on the current workforce, but may have long-lasting effects on new waves of employees. Sonoma County and Santa Clara County have also faced this challenge and developed formal mentorship programs to promote employee retention, expand employee networks, and provide professional development opportunities. In the current social and economic climate, it is crucial that our employees have access to opportunities that create a sense of personal and professional belonging, leading them to stay with our organizations.

The Need for Action

In 2012, the Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) created a Leadership Development Workgroup to discuss and implement succession planning strategies to address a potential leadership vacuum due to the number of managers eligible for retirement. In a review of its workforce at that time, HSD determined that 50% of their managers were eligible for retirement with another 9% becoming eligible within the next five years. As a result, HSD created the Mentor Project in 2013, aimed at providing HSD staff with opportunities to develop leadership skills and program knowledge in different areas of the department with the goal of providing a pipeline into leadership positions.

As part of the BASSC Executive Development Program 2017/2018 cohort, the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) conducted a case study of HSD's Mentor Project with the hope that SSA could implement a similar program in their county. In 2018, SSA examined its own workforce and discovered that 36% of its workforce was eligible for retirement. Moreover, in a 2018 Gallup Report surveying Santa Clara County employees, 40% of SSA staff indicated they were interested in professional development opportunities. The culmination of potential retirements and the desire for employees to grow within the agency led to SSA developing its own mentoring program and launching the pilot in 2019.

Both HSD and SSA determined that a mentoring program was necessary to mitigate the impacts of employee retirements and to provide employees with desired professional development opportunities. Each county developed its own mentoring program, taking into account its respective resources, challenges, and needs.

Sonoma County Mentor Project

Each cycle of HSD's Mentor Project starts with the creation of a pool of mentors by engaging participants from prior years as well as recruiting new supervisors and managers. Mentors are assigned to one of several discussion panels that allow prospective mentees to learn more about the mentors, including their mentoring style and objectives for their mentees. Prospective mentees complete an application indicating their top choices for mentors and the Mentor Project team manually matches mentees with mentors based

on their preferences and the mentor's availability. Some mentors may have the capacity to mentor multiple mentees as a group, while others prefer one-on-one mentoring. From there, the mentor-mentee matches are confirmed and the Mentor Project commences.

As the participants embark on their three-month mentoring journey, they are provided a roadmap of suggestions, resources, and tools to help make the mentoring experience a positive one. The time commitment is at least four hours each month, and at the end of the third month, mentees complete an Individual Development Plan to help identify goals and areas to focus on for future growth. Some mentors may also have their mentees work on a project during the three months and present a final work product at the conclusion of the program. This process provides valuable and practical experience that the mentee may not otherwise have obtained through the course of their regular work assignments.

The Mentor Project's main goals are to develop leadership skills and program knowledge within the organization and to develop competencies for performance enhancement in the mentee's current role. Some key objectives include:

- Providing opportunities for staff to develop and foster professional relationships outside of their current professional circles and allowing them the opportunity to learn about other divisions in the department and how those divisions fit into the rest of the county, state, and overall community.
- Providing opportunities for mentors to share their knowledge and experience with mentees to help them maximize effectiveness in their current positions and prepare them for potential career advancements.
- Developing a pool of internal employees who may be more prepared to assume higher-level positions that become available due to retirements and promotions.

The Mentor Project team evaluates the program's success through pre- and post-surveys highlighting

key areas such as job satisfaction and commitment to the organization. Program participants reported notable positive changes in working conditions, job alignment with personal values, and a sense of belonging. The Mentor Project has been going strong for eight years and continues to be a key resource for HSD staff who yearn for professional development and career advancement opportunities.

Santa Clara County Mentoring Program

SSA began development of the SSA Mentoring Program in February 2019. This effort was led by a three person Design Team with input from a Mentoring Program Committee. The Design Team recruited committee members, created resources and training materials, explored different technologies including a sophisticated mentoring software called Wisdom Share, and developed content and an implementation plan. The overall design and planning process took six to eight months, with a planned launch of the pilot program in September 2019.

In July 2019, mentor and mentee recruitment efforts were underway and interested participants applied through an online process via the Wisdom Share software. The application process included a thorough questionnaire aimed at determining key identifiers used in the mentor/mentee matching process. The Wisdom Share platform compiled the data from the applications, and the built-in matching algorithms produced recommended mentorship pairings for the Design Team to review. Once the matches were confirmed, the mentor and mentee pairings began the six-month Mentoring Program. The Design Team created an in-depth program schedule along with resources and toolkits to help guide the pairings through each month of the pilot.

The Design Team evaluated the success of the process using a combination of human resources data and surveys at key points of the mentoring relationship, including a baseline survey (pre-program), a mid-point survey, a completion survey (post-program), and a set of follow-up surveys conducted at nine months and twenty-four months after program completion to observe any long-term benefits

resulting from the program. Key indicators that the pilot program is successful at the department level include increased internal promotions into leadership roles, increased retention across the agency, increased staff engagement and wellness, and continued participation from staff to be mentors and mentees. At the individual level, the pilot program is considered successful if participants are able to obtain new skills and competencies, if mentors and mentees are able to accomplish their goals, and if participants are willing to recommend the program to others.

In February 2020, SSA concluded the pilot with 27 pairs of mentors and mentees from all four divisions of the agency encompassing all levels of the organization. The Design Team is actively reviewing and analyzing the results from the pilot to make necessary revisions and updates, with plans to launch a full nine-month Mentoring Program in September 2020.

Why HSA Needs a Formal Mentoring Program

There are many reasons for an organization to institute a mentoring program. Those reasons help drive the design and complexity of the program, as well as the allocation of resources to get it up and running. Like HSD and SSA, HSA continually struggles with talent recruitment and retention. Staffing turnover results in loss of institutional knowledge and experience, increased costs in recruiting and training new staff, and stress and anxiety amongst the remaining workforce. Mentoring programs help alleviate some of these concerns by promoting professional development and preparing the workforce to assume progressively responsible roles. This leads to increased learning and knowledge-sharing, increased job satisfaction, increased employee well-being, and reduced turnover. However, solving recruitment and retention issues by providing professional development opportunities is just one part of the equation. A more fundamental concern that continues to surface at HSA and more broadly within the City and County of San Francisco is the issue of equity.

In 2018, HSA was part of a collaborative of City and County of San Francisco departments that participated in a training led by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) focused on addressing racial inequities and disparities in government. HSA formed a Racial Equity Work Group (REWG) and, with support from HSA leadership, published a report in September 2019 on Advancing Racial Equity at HSA. The report focuses on three main priorities covering recruitment & hiring, leadership development & promotion, and organizational culture. One recommendation from the report called for the creation of a formal mentoring program to provide HSA staff opportunities to expand professional networks and advance in their careers.

Separately, in April 2019, HSA's Learning and Organizational Development team began development of an employee mentoring program inspired by San Francisco Mayor London Breed's call to action for the City's departments to implement policies ensuring a diverse, fair, and inclusive workplace. The proposed structure of the employee mentoring program is similar to the programs implemented by HSD and SSA, comprising an application process, pre-mentoring training, mentor-mentee matching, mentor-mentee planning, program execution, and program evaluation. The main areas where HSA can draw from both HSD and SSA's experience are in the mentor-mentee matching and the evaluation process, as well as the creation of a mentoring advisory committee.

Recommendations

Creation of a Mentoring Advisory Committee

HSA may benefit from the creation of a mentoring advisory committee to help research, develop, and implement the objectives of the mentoring program. The committee should also be involved in the design, planning, and evaluation of the program to ensure goals are met. It is important that the mentoring program is built based on input from a broad spectrum of professional and personal experiences

and expertise; therefore, the committee should comprise representatives from all divisions and levels of the organization. SSA's Mentoring Program Committee represented all four divisions in the agency, and it was important for the committee to include a GARE representative as well. It may be prudent for HSA to leverage connections formed from the GARE REWG focus groups to identify potential committee members.

Mentor-Mentee Matching

Informal mentor-mentee relationships can develop through a variety of different interactions, networks, and connections. Although it may provide some level of comfort and familiarity to formalize these relationships into the official mentoring program, this format may also perpetuate inequities in who has access to certain individuals and opportunities. This potential problem can be addressed early on at the application phase. With input from the advisory committee, HSA should create an application process that not only captures information about an individual's professional and personal goals, but also personal interests and hobbies. While the underlying goal of the mentoring program may be to aid in the professional development of a mentee, mentoring relationships can be fortified through shared personal interests that may result in a stronger, longer-lasting bond between the mentor and mentee. The advisory committee should be involved in developing criteria for the matching process to ensure mentors and mentees are matched in an equitable manner. HSA may also benefit from a mentoring platform such as Wisdom Share which not only provides an algorithmic mentor-mentee matching capability, but a plethora of other mentoring resources and tools as well. Although the initial cost investment in a mentoring platform may present a challenge during difficult budget times, having a proper mentoring tool can lead to a more stable and sustainable program in the future.

Evaluation

Timely and thorough feedback is essential in determining what is working, what needs to be changed,

and what should be amplified. Again, the advisory committee would be involved in determining what success would look like for the program. While surveys completed at key milestones provide important feedback about mentors' and mentees' experiences, HSA should also incorporate other data elements related to recruitment, hiring, retention, and performance management as part of the data analysis and evaluation. The main challenges of integrating the aforementioned datasets into the evaluation process are access to the data and the confidential nature of the data itself. HSA would need to work with other City of San Francisco partners in determining how to overcome these barriers.

Conclusion

HSA may benefit from having a formal mentoring program that is built with an eye towards equity. The program will not only provide professional development opportunities to employees, but will also bring HSA one step further in HSA efforts to advance racial equity in the agency. During these challenging times, it is important to support our employees by creating a sense of belonging and increasing the likelihood that an employee would want to stay with our agency.

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